

New Years—Out with the Old!

Prologue

Ella

Her arms were in agony, stretched too far by the ties that secured her to the structural pole in the barn.

Ella had failed, she knew.

And her time was coming.

Time, pain, and despair filled her. She should have died long ago; there was no hope for her. And she knew . . .

She heard screams, horrendous screams of terror. The outer door burst open, and the dim light provided by the night skies lit up the darkness.

She knew . . .

Her time was up. The next year's victim was being brought in. Maybe she would be the one to break the pattern, to be someone to win . . . something. Freedom.

Or, at the very least, life.

The new girl continued to fight and scream, until their oppressor pressed the tip of his knife to her throat and warned, "Stop now! Or you'll bleed to death before you ever get your chance to live!"

*Chance to live . . . and all the torture and brutality that came with it!*

New Years—Out With the Old!/Heather Graham

Maybe, Ella thought she should be glad. Glad it might finally be coming to an end. She had gone through weeks where she'd barely eaten, when she'd wondered if an infection might set into her wounds, if she might just die . . .

But she didn't die.

And now she would.

That was true, so very true.

And the man who had kidnapped her and kidnapped and murdered the ones who had come before her . . .

Who would murder her soon as the clock struck midnight for the year's end . . .

Started to laugh.

“New Years! Firecrackers! The great ball dropping in Times Square! Celebrations across the world! Oh, yeah. Year's end, out with the old, and in with the new!”

He stared straight at Ella.

“Oh, yeah! Out with the old, and in with the new!”

### New Years Approaching!

Jackson Crow had no idea why Angela was standing at the kitchen window, staring out with an expression of sadness on her face. Nothing that he knew about was wrong. Breakfast was over. It was just about time to head into the office and was only two days until New Years. But the office had been quiet—criminals had been extremely well behaved in the last days—since Christmas.

The kids were in the parlor, playing a game, they'd gotten for Christmas—a board game, which was cool, Jackson thought.

They were staying off their phones—and thinking about their moves!

He and Angela were heading into the office, but with any luck, they'd let everyone be off tomorrow and New Year's Day—ready themselves to accept any calls that came in, but they were accustomed to living lives that were “on call.”

But those agents they worked with were amazing people; they always had help when they needed it.

And in general, they were exceptionally grateful to Adam Harrison, who—with his philanthropy and dedication to law and order—had created the specialized unit he ran unofficially known as the Krewe of Hunters.

And a Christmas Eve situation that had at first appeared deadly and tragic had turned out to be a strange miracle and as far as he knew . . .

Maybe that was it. Maybe there was something he didn't know?

“Angela?” he queried softly, sliding up behind her and slipping his arms around her.

“Hey, we’re about to say goodbye to the old and start a brand-new year.”

She turned slightly in his arms and tried to smile. “Right. A brand-new year, great friends, co-workers who are all but family, sweet kids . . .”

“In with the new, out with the old and anything that bugged us in the past!” he said lightly.

New Years was just a couple of days away. And so far, it was looking as if New Years might be all right for the two of them, too. They were going to stay in and have a few friends in for a small party in their beautiful historic home on New Years Eve, and on New Years Day, they were heading off to a theme park for a brief vacation with the kids. The McFadden brothers would be running the office—agents there and in the field—while they were out on vacation was becoming customary when they were busy elsewhere—or on vacation.

All should have been well with the world—or *their* world, at any rate.

“Hey, why the face?” he asked her. “We all love the house and now . . . well, New Years is almost upon us. Old is out and New is in!”

“Out with the old!” she repeated.

“Right, and . . .” he began.

But then he knew. They never called a case “cold” in their unit. They worked on a case or situation until it was solved—in one way or another. And with the unusual help they were able to acquire through their special so-called “talents,” that wasn’t usually a problem. But . . .

To his knowledge, they had no “old” cases.

She turned and looked at him. “I had the oddest dream last night! It was about the woman who came to Bruce McFadden just about a year ago now.”

He nodded. He remembered Bruce telling him about the case. The mother of a friend of Bruce’s ten-year-old daughter had come to Bruce, knowing he was affiliated with law enforcement. She had been frantic about her older daughter with whom she’d had a horrific fight about the girl’s plans to tour Europe with a small trust fund she’d inherited from a grandparent rather than using that money to go to college.

“Ella Howard,” Angela said. “The older daughter was Ella Howard; and if I remember right, her mom Jeannie was heartbroken about the whole thing and blamed herself.”

“Right. We began an investigation that ended quickly. Ella’s mom, Jeannie Howard, called us and apologized, saying she’d gotten a post card from her daughter telling her that she was fine—just getting ready to head out, she was living her own dream and that when she had time to lead her own life, she’d be home to see everyone. She loved them all, just needed to do her own thing,” Jackson reminded her.

“I know. And I believed it. Then,” Angela told him.

“Why don’t you believe it now?” he asked her.

“You haven’t watched your phone.” she told him.

He frowned; as head of the Krewe of Hunters, he did his best to be available every second of the day.

Then again, so did Angela.

“So, what—”

“You didn’t miss an emergency,” Angela assured him quickly. “The text is from Adam. He’s concerned because they found remains just outside an old abandoned fast-food store. About thirty miles south of us, farmland, factories, that kind of thing, around the ruins. It appears that they’ve been there at least a year, but they also found a single bone that might have been there a lot longer. Anyway, I’m not sure why, but . . .”

Her phone trilled. She looked at Jackson and grabbed it. “Adam! Putting you on speakerphone, Jackson is with me,” she said, hitting the button so they could both hear the voice of the Krewe’s creator.

“They’ve identified the young woman. Clare Brunet, disappeared about a year ago, give or take. She was a poor kid, just turned eighteen, from a broken home, dad in prison, mom an addict, and she wound up working the streets, but a sweet young woman, ready to help others, by all accounts. But, still, when you live on the streets—”

Jackson thought of their recent strange case at Christmas.

It was too true. When you were down and out and living on the streets, there was no one to really know when you “disappeared.”

“We’ll head out to that area,” Jackson said. “See what we can discover. Cops are still out there?”

“At the site,” Adam said. “But . . .”

“You’re wondering if there are others in the area. I’m going to pull up satellite images, see what else I can discover along the way,” Angela said.

Angela said goodbye to Adam and started searching for the area where they found the remains.

“So . . .” Jackson glanced at Angela.

“Mary Tiger will be here. This is driving me crazy, quite suddenly,” Angela said.

“Please, Jackson—”

“I’m out the door already,” he told her.

And he was, at least, at the door and heading out to start the car while Angela let Mary know what they were doing. She quickly joined him.

“It just seems . . .” she began. “Weird!”

“What?”

“Three things. Adam’s call. Me, being haunted by what shouldn’t be anything, a young woman running around Europe . . .”

“And?”

“Out with the old, in with the new!” Angela said.

He shook his head, not sure if he should smile or not.

They, as Krewe members with their special ‘gifts,’ get help that wasn’t available to other law enforcement officers.

But every cop, agent, officer—frankly, any human being—had what they called “gut.” Maybe it was a human condition. Instinct. Instinct could kick in.

He said the word aloud.

“Well, thankfully, you don’t think I’m crazy!” she told him.

“At this point? Oh, face it. We’re both crazy,” he assured her. “Hopefully, in the best of ways.”

“Jackson!” she said suddenly, studying her phone. She looked over at him and he glanced back at her quickly.

“What is it? More—”

“No, no, I keyed in a question about extreme beliefs, and I found some wild discussions going on! I’ve got to call in and get our best people on it . . . there’s someone who has written in a whole thing not about a *second* coming, but a *creation* of a new age and it requires forty days of *blood* and . . . creation! And several people have responded to this. The new age favors the powerful, and those privileged to have heard the word will watch as the new strength grows to save the people and . . . there’s some kind of a timeline! A ‘life vessel’ is chosen but must succeed with the distance of a year . . . and . . .”

She broke off, looking over at him again. “Jackson, there could be something going on out there that we know nothing about!”

“There are plenty of things going on out there that we know nothing about, and they could be talking about sacrificing chickens or something like that. The scariest thing is that it’s amazing to see how many people fall for discussion groups like this—”

“There’s someone out there leading it. And worse, there’s someone out there acting on it! I’ve got to get this into our tech crew to see what else they can discover.”

She made the call and when she was finished, Jackson saw they had reached their destination.

Law enforcement vehicles littered the parking lot that had once afforded free space for the restaurant’s customers.

Pavement had long ago buckled, and grass and weeds ripped through old asphalt just as vines had climbed along the crumbling walls and cracked glass of the derelict building that once housed the restaurant.

They parked by one of the forensic vehicles. Jackson saw a friend with the Virginia State Police, Pete Mulvey, and as he and Angela exited the car, Pete saw him and waved a hand in the air.

Jackson and Angela joined him. Pete didn't bother with casual conversation.

"Remains were found straight back there in the rear end of what was the parking lot, about ten feet into the wooded area. We've had crews out here, cadaver dogs, but so far . . . nothing else. I talked to Adam—he said that he'd have you out here. I mean, we are seriously hoping that this is . . . well, nothing good about a single murder, but we're hoping this hasn't become a disposal ground for a serial killer."

"Naturally, and with some of the things we've seen around the country; and of course, Adam wanted us out here, too. So, I hope—" Jackson began.

Pete cut him off. "When the hell have you ever seen me care what the hell the jurisdiction was? Hell, no, I'm all into answers! Please, share info all the way round!"

"Pete, you are the best," Angela told him, smiling.

"High praise from you, Special Agent Hawkins-Crow!" he told her. Pete was in his early forties, a solid cop who had made his way to his position through years of hard work. They came across situations where they worked together often enough, and it was good when different agencies could work so well together.

“Call me whatever!” Angela said, grimacing. “Anyway, Pete, I’m curious. Have you heard anything about a strange cult around here—or even a person who might have a very strange religious belief?”

Pete groaned. “A strange person?” he inquired dryly. “These days, hop on social media and you can find the *strange* in just about anything.”

“True, but . . . anybody around here known by the locals to be a bit distant, or off, or maybe judgmental of others?” Jackson asked him.

Pete paused, frowning as he looked at Angela and Jackson.

“This area is small, but not that small. Dr. Mendelson, our M.E., is about to have the remains lifted and transported to the morgue, but you may want a quiet chat with him. He lives out this way, so, he may know more about the locals than I do,” he said.

“Thanks!”

Angela was already on her way toward the overgrown area where Dr. Mendelson, a man with a thatch of thick white hair, was hunkered down as he studied the remains on the ground.

They’d met the M.E. before, too. He was experienced, confident enough in himself to listen to others, and most importantly, a man committed to looking beyond the obvious.

He saw them coming.

“I heard you were headed here. Adam gave me a thumbs up,” Mendelson told them.

“We know so little right now, but . . . you know, as long as I’ve done this, still breaks my heart when we find a young person who had a hard life—and then a hard death,” he told them.

“You know what happened?” Jackson asked. The M.E. was damned good if he did—the remains were just about down to bone.

Mendelson extended his hand, creating a gesture by the skull.

“Scratch on the bone there suggests that her throat was slit. I won’t be able to tell you anything about her last meal, but there is hair—and the bone may give us something. I’ll need to get what I can to the lab, see what they can discover.”

“Dr. Mendelson,” Jackson said, “Adam reported that you identified these remains as a young woman named Clare Brunet. How on earth—”

“Well, I should say we’re assuming the remains are Clare Brunet,” Dr. Mendelson said. He gently picked up one of the hands—barely held together by shreds of flesh and ligaments—and indicated the face that she was wearing an I.D. bracelet.

Mendelson looked at Jackson. “Says Clare Brunet. It’s . . .”

“It’s the kind of bracelet someone who cares about her gives a teenage girl,” Angela said. “Not gold, not worth stealing—”

“She wasn’t robbed. She’s also wearing a necklace. It appears to be gold. Maybe not worth a fortune, but valuable. And it was left on her. Personally, especially assuming that this is Clare Brunet—I don’t see this as a robber,” Mendelson said. “More like . . .”

“An execution?” Jackson suggested.

“A sacrifice,” Angela murmured.

Mendelson shrugged. “That’s the part where you come in. We’ll do all possible tests and give you what we can get as soon as we get it, but . . .”

“Hey!”

One of the young women on the forensic team, working about twenty feet from where they stood, was on her knees in a pile of brush.

She had something in her gloved hand.

“A wallet,” she called. “And according to the I.D. in here, she is Clare Brunet.”

“Heartbreaking,” Mendelson murmured.

Angela stood by Jackson’s side, thoughtful.

She looked at him. “I hardly think her killer is still standing around here, but . . .”

“You don’t think her killer has gone far.”

“No, I . . .”

She smiled at him. “We’re in a great area for lots of space, plenty of quiet and distance. This restaurant went out of business, and it’s been a while, and no one has scooped up the land. And . . .”

She paused, looking at her phone. “Farmhouses, barns, and factories! Jackson, there’s an old building that was used as an automobile repair shop about a mile and a half south from here. Small neighborhood . . .”

She broke off. She was staring into the woods. Her behavior was strange that day to him, and he knew his wife and partner so very, very well.

“Dr. Mendelson, thank you. I think we’re going to scour the area a bit,” he said, turning to head back to the car.

Angela did the same.

And it was then he saw what Angels had seen.

A ghost.

The spirit of one who had remained.

No, not just a ghost.

The ghost of the poor young woman whose remains they had just discovered.

The ghost of Clare Brunet. And she was following them, avoiding looking down at her earthly remains as she hurried to come up around them.

“Oh, thank God!” the ghost whispered, falling into step along with Jackson and Angela. “I have a friend, Austin Marley, who died way, way back during World War II, but he told me that sometimes, not often, but sometimes, a spirit could find a living being who saw them! Thank God, you do see me! And . . . I mean, well, my life wasn’t worth that much anyway—”

“No! Please, don’t say that!” Angela told her. “Every life is valuable!”

“Yes, well, this is bizarre, but I haven’t had a bad death,” Clare said, smiling ruefully.

“But here’s the thing! He must be stopped!”

“He?” Jackson asked.

They’d reached the car. The ghost slid into the backseat easily enough, and Angela took a seat in the front passenger’s side and looked back at her as Jackson took his position behind the wheel.

“Okay, who must be stopped? Help us, please,” Angela told the ghost.

“And where am I going?” Jackson asked. “Is time—”

“Oh, my dear lord, yes! Time is everything right now!” the spirit of Clare Brunet told them. “In with the new, out with the old! He’s crazy—he believes that a greater power is coming, that Satan isn’t evil, just a way smarter businessman and now it’s his turn. And

every year this horrible, sick man kidnaps a new girl—and kills the old one. Your M.E. is going to discover other marks on my bones . . . during the year, he bleeds his victims forty times, like forty for the forty days and nights that Christ fasted . . . I don't understand all of his craziness, but . . . he believes when he finds the right woman, he'll create a virgin birth, and bring a new world order into being. And so, it's New Year's Eve when he kills the victim who has failed him to make way for the new."

"And you know exactly where he is?" Jackson asked her.

"Exactly, at any moment? No. But I do know how to find Ella Howard," she told them quietly. "She knows now . . . she tried so hard to talk to him, to save me! She—she—couldn't save me, and she can't see me, but I've tried to be with her. I've tried desperately to figure out something to do to get help to her. And then when I was wandering desperately around, they found my body! And . . ."

"And that hurt you all over again, and I'm so sorry!" Angela told her.

"But now, we can save her! But we must get to her! He's going to start; he's going to tie her down on the sacrifice table because . . . well, he thinks he's going to find the right girl; and she'll miraculously have a virgin birth, but when she doesn't. . . well, New Year's Eve. Out with the old!"

Angela glanced at Jackson, and he gave her a nod.

Hunches. Hunches along with the ability to see the dead who remained.

Maybe at the end of a year, human beings were all just a little bit haunted by the past, by letting go of the old.

“Wait!” Angela said as Jackson followed the route Clare’s ghost was giving them. “I think we need to park away and be careful as we approach lest—”

“Lest he see us and determined that his master wants Ella dead one way or another!” Clare’s spirit burst in. “Yes, of course, because he has a knife, it’s a massive blade, and he spends half the year sharpening it! He wouldn’t plan on killing her until right before the stroke of midnight on New Year’s Eve, but if he was threatened . . .”

“There’s that building, the old auto repair shop right ahead. And a group of trees right over there,” Angela said.

“Got it,” Jackson told her.

He pulled the car into the cover of the trees.

“I’ll race ahead and tell you what’s happening,” Clare’s spirit told them. “There’s a way to slip around the side that’s not entirely hidden, but he’d need to be looking for you. I’ll get started. See, there’s a back entrance right around there!”

“Gotcha,” Jackson assured her.

Clare raced straight for the building.

Jackson and Angela looked at one another and quietly started around.

Ella

Being tied to a beam for a year played havoc with one’s muscles, with any ability to fight back.

Ella tried. Because the time had come.

The new girl was still weeping, weeping and crying.

Ella had tried to tell her that she had time, that help could come in the year.

But it was difficult. Because her own time had come.

She fought the man who called himself Michael as he wrestled with her to tie her down on the table. She tried her best to object to every move he was making. But her arms flailed uselessly.

She managed one good kick, but that just infuriated him.

And in the end, he won.

“You’re crazy! Certifiably crazy,” Ella screamed at him as he tied the last knot around her ankles. “Give yourself up! Can’t you see? This isn’t going to happen; no girl you steal is going to manage your ‘virgin’ birth! Let me go, let me go now and I’ll help you. I’ll speak in your defense and—”

He stuffed a wad of filthy burlap in her mouth and bound it around her head with another strip of the old tool bag.

*The taste was horrendous; she could barely breathe. Maybe she’d ruin it all for him by choking to death before he could cut her to pieces, slit her throat.*

“The time. The time! It’s coming, and then the sacrifices you and I have made will bring in the New World Order!” he informed her.

He was going to leave. Leave her there is misery.

Waiting . . .

Waiting for him to return and perform his ridiculous little ritual.

But first . . .

“Blood must be shed!” he told her, and smiling, he approached her with his giant, curved, shimmering and sharpened knife.

### Before the Stroke of Midnight

They’d reached the door that Clare had described, right on the far side of the building. And as they did so, Clare’s spirit emerged, distraught.

“He’s got her on the table! He cuts his victims through the year for his ‘forty days of blood,’ but right before, he creates long slashes and then . . . I was out of it by the time he finally cut my throat and that won’t happen until just before midnight on New Year’s Eve, but he’s going to hurt her so badly . . . I mean . . . she’s down now! She could bleed to death if he . . . oh . . .”

Jackson looked at Angela and she looked back at him.

And he knew they were thinking alike.

With a nod, she moved off.

“What, what are you doing?” Clare demanded.

“Distracting him,” Angela told her.

And Angela hurried on to the main entrance, throwing the door open and calling out, “Hey, anyone here? I need help! Please, is anyone here?”

Jackson quietly slipped through the back door.

As they had planned—and hoped—she’d drawn the man standing over Ella at the sacrificial table to take steps toward the entrance, to look at what was happening.

And being in, Angela pretended she knew nothing about what was going on and let out a horrendous scream.

She turned as if she would run.

Of course, the man went after her.

Jackson drew his weapon, hurrying toward the table lest her captor turn back to finish off his victim knowing that he was gone.

And the man turned back.

He looked so ordinary. Maybe six-foot-even, brown, slightly curly hair, slim but wiry body . . . a man maybe in his late twenties or early thirties.

“Stop, now, or I’ll shoot!” Jackson warned him.

He turned to run in Angela’s direction.

“Stop, now, or I’ll be the one who shoots,” Angela said.

Well, the ghost of Clare Brunet had been right. Because thus threatened, the man turned with his knife raised high, determined to slice into Ella before he could be killed himself.

But no good; Jackson didn’t need to kill the man, though he would have done so.

Angela had fired. She’d caught him perfectly in the left shoulder, the force of her shot causing him to spin around and fall backwards, the knife flying from his hand.

Landing harmlessly on the ground.

He lay there, screaming.

“Oh, shut up, help is on the way,” Angela assured him.

She still had her Glock aimed at him. Jackson put through the call, reaching Adam who, he knew, would get Pete and his crew right there along with all the medical help that they might need.

He hurried forward himself to remove all the ties that were holding Ella to the table. She was weeping hysterically but telling him they had to rescue the other girl—the new girl who had been slated to be either the virgin mother—or the sacrifice for the coming year.

And of course, he did.

But the man on the floor was screaming. “Do it, do it, you fool, you don’t know, you don’t know what must be done, but He will come for you, so . . . you won! You just shoot me!”

“I don’t think so,” Angela told him. “Because in my world order, there’s justice. There’s life, there’s belief in justice. And while I am tasked with stopping your murdering and cruelty, I am not the judge or the jury or even the medical experts who must deal with you now!”

He smiled. She was right; their part was over.

But as he helped the hysterical young woman who had been tied to a structural pole, Angela stood over the fallen man on the ground until help rushed in, Pete and his local officers, EMTs, those who could help the victims,

There was always confusion. People getting to the right place at a crime scene, medical help arriving. And they discovered the man who had kidnapped and killed in the name of his “New World Order” was Michael Cardigan, an “influencer” who had somehow managed to take his own rhetoric way too seriously.

He would receive medical attention. Whether he wound up with a lifelong prison term or in a facility for the criminally insane remained to be seen.

As Angela had said, they were there to enforce the law. They were not judges and jury—or even the kind of medical personnel who could determine the true state of the man’s mind.

The ghost of Clare Brunet stayed with them through it all. She stood near the victims and touched their hair with gentle fingers.

It seemed that while they didn’t see her, she did give them a soothing touch.

And when Jackson and Angela were ready to leave the last of the work behind, Clare came with them and offered them both hugs and thanks.

“I just wish we’d been . . . sooner!” Angela whispered to her.

“You gave me everything! You gave me peace, and a sense that I did come into this world to give . . . to be . . . I don’t know! But I feel it now, I feel the warmth! I was able to make a mark on this world, and I’m ready for the next!” Clare’s spirit told them.

And it was true; she was already warmer.

She blew them a kiss and raced into the woods. They watched her go; and they stood together, Jackson with his arm around his wife.

A split-second burst of light tore through the heavens.

And then it was gone.

“We still have paperwork—”

“Always! And it can wait until morning.”

“But the hospital first! We need to check on the victims.”

They discovered that the second victim was Mary Goodwin; and she'd been abducted from a hike. But she was fine—her family was with her, and she'd be released that night. Her parents were sweetly, hysterically grateful.

And it was nice.

The good part of what they did.

Ella was going to be in the hospital for a while longer while all the incisions she'd received "bleeding" for forty days were carefully tended to, and where she could receive physical rehab to get all her parts functioning well again.

It was there her mom Jeannie found them, and where she was a bit of a basket case, but a beautiful basket case in her gratitude.

They'd said goodbye to Clare. But Ella's sister was desperate to get their mom to have a cup of coffee and calm down enough for the doctors to allow them to stay through the night. They assured Jeannie they'd wait until she and Ella's little sister could get some food.

They were able to spend a few minutes with Ella. And Ella, too, told them she couldn't thank them enough.

They assured her that her life was all the gratitude they might need.

"It was . . . surreal!" Ella told him. "I knew what was happening. I'd seen what he'd done to Clare. But . . ."

"But?" Angela asked softly.

“I could have sworn she was . . . I don’t know. Somehow with me in spirit. That’s crazy, I know. But in the end . . . I felt as if she was telling me just to hang on a while longer and that I’d be okay . . . and then you came!” Ella said.

Angela smiled at her. “Maybe her spirit was with you, who are we to judge?”

Ella nodded. “I always like to believe that while we know there is evil out there, there’s more goodness in the world as well!”

When Ella’s mom and sister returned, Jackson and Angela left at last.

New Year’s Eve was actually upon them then—it was past the stroke of midnight.

And when they walked into their new home, they checked on the kids and Mary Tiger. All were sleeping peacefully.

And they slid into one another’s arms.

“Out with the old!” Jackson said.

“And a good, good out with the old! Not a throw-out, a solve!” Angela said.

“So, maybe . . . hm. ‘All’s well that ends well!’”

She grinned at him.

“And into the promise of tomorrow! Happy ‘almost’ New Year’s, my love! Oh! I mean, sometimes, even into the new year, there’s the old to be cherished!” she told him.

“Because, well . . . I will always cherish you!”

“And I, you,” he vowed. Then he frowned. “Hey! Just how darned old are we now?” he muttered.

And laughing, arm in arm, they headed for bed.

And it was true. There was the old to be solved, and there was the new . . .

New Years—Out With the Old!/Heather Graham

And the old to be cherished forever.

“